



Russia's "International" Civil War

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Abstract: Soviet leaders for decades complained about the inept and ill-fated Allied Intervention in the Russian Civil War, yet the Bolsheviks themselves deployed at least as many foreign troops in that conflict in the form of ex-POWs of the Central Powers, who were persuaded or coerced into joining their new Red Army. In fact, this practice led, in part, to the Intervention, though the Allies wrongly assumed the Central Powers – rather than the Bolsheviks – were arming these Austrian and Hungarian POWs. Indeed, a kind of civil war that could have played out inside the Austro-Hungarian Empire – were it not for World War One – between the Empire's restless Czech and Slovak minorities, on one hand, and the dominant Austrians and Hungarians, on the other hand, instead actually played out inside Russia during the Russian Civil War. Aside from three White armies, the principal fighting strength of the anti-Bolshevik forces derived from the Czecho-Slovak Legion, an ad hoc army of former Austro-Hungarian soldiers taken prisoner by Russia on the Eastern Front, then recruited by Czecho-Slovak independence leader Tomas G. Masaryk to trade sides and join the Allied armies on the Western Front. The Legion had more battle-field success against Moscow's Red Army than did any one of the three White armies. Moreover, the Red Army they faced initially consisted largely of Internationalist units consisting of Austrian and Hungarian ex-POWs. In this way, the Russian Civil War resembled a proxy fight between two sides of a civil war within the Austro-Hungarian Army.

Keywords: Allied Intervention, Bolsheviks, Central Powers, Ceska Druzina, Czecho-Slovak Legion, Internationalists Prisoners of War (POWs), Red Army, Russian Civil War, Russian Revolution, Trans-Siberian Railway, World War One

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Русская «интернациональная» Гражданская война

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Аннотация: Советские лидеры десятилетиями жаловались на неумелое и злополучное вмешательство стран Антанты в Гражданскую войну в России, однако сами большевики задействовали в этом конфликте не меньше войск из бывших военнопленных центральных держав, которых уговорили или которые вынуждены были присоединиться к Красной Армии. Фактически, эта практика отчасти привела к интервенции, хотя страны Антанты ошибочно считали, что австрийских и венгерских военнопленных вооружали центральные державы (Германия и ее союзники), а не большевики. Подобная Гражданская война вполне могла бы разыгаться внутри Австро-Венгерской Империи между добивающимися национального освобождения чешскими и словацкими меньшинствами, с одной стороны, и господствующими австрийцами и венграми – с другой, если бы в 1914 г. не началась Первая мировая война. Вместо этого межнациональная война разыгралась внутри России в 1918 г. Помимо трех русских белых армий основную боевую силу антибольшевистских сил в России составлял Чехословацкий корпус. Это была особая армия из бывших австро-венгерских солдат, взятых в плен Россией на Восточном фронте, а затем сагитированная влиться в армии Антанты на Западном фронте в обмен на реализацию чехо-словацкой независимости, воплощаемой Томашем Г. Масариком. Легион намного успешнее воевал против Красной армии, чем любая из русских белых армий. Более того, Красная Армия, с которой они столкнулись, первоначально состояла в основном из интернационалистских подразделений, в которую входили бывшие воен-

нопленные австрийцы и венгры. Таким образом, Гражданская война в России напоминала промежуточную (прокси) борьбу славян австро-венгерской армии против австрийцев и венгров той же армии.

Ключевые слова: интервенция союзников, большевики, центральные державы, Чешская дружина, Чехословацкий легион, военнопленные-интернационалисты, Красная Армия, Гражданская война в России, Русская революция, Транссибирская магистраль, Первая мировая война

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Soviet leaders for decades complained about the inept and ill-fated Allied Intervention in the Russian Civil War, yet the Bolsheviks themselves deployed at least as many foreign troops in that conflict in the form of ex-POWs of the Central Powers, who were persuaded or coerced into joining their new Red Army. In fact, this practice led, in part, to the Intervention, though the Allies wrongly assumed the Central Powers – rather than the Bolsheviks – were arming these Austrian and Hungarian POWs.

Indeed, a kind of civil war that could have played out inside the Austro-Hungarian Empire – were it not for World War One – between the Empire's restless Czech and Slovak minorities, on one hand, and the dominant Austrians and Hungarians, on the other hand, instead actually played out inside Russia during the Russian Civil War.

A Czecho-Slovak Unit in the Tsar's Army

Before the outbreak of World War One, tens of thousands of Czech and Slovak émigrés lived in Russia as farmers, small-business owners, or skilled factory workers¹. Encouraged by policies that encouraged immigration to help settle and cultivate Russia's vast

¹ The Russian Census of 1897 counted more than 50,000 Czechs and Slovaks, but that number is thought to have grown significantly by 1914 (Richard Pipes, 1997. Pp. 300–301). Eric Lohr cites a figure of 200,000 Czechs and Slovaks – about 70,000 of them in Ukraine – with more than half immigrating in the final three decades of the Tsarist era (Eric Lohr, 2003. P. 224. Note 170). Other sources cite estimates of 60,000 – 120,000 Czechs and Slovaks living in Russia before the war. One Slovak legionnaire from Russia said there were 600 Slovaks living there prior to the war (Josef Orszagh, 1927. Pp. 11–12).

untilled lands, almost 900,000 immigrants overall arrived from multinational Austria-Hungary between 1828 and 1915 (Eric Lohr, 2003. P. 5)². Among them were tens of thousands of Czechs and Slovaks, who established influential colonies in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The largest numbers, however, resided in Ukraine and the vicinity of Kiev, where there was a Czech High School and a "Prague Hotel".

With the outbreak of a war that pitted Russia and Serbia against Austro-Hungarian and German armies on the Eastern Front, the émigrés volunteered to serve in the Russian Imperial Army, in part out of loyalty to Russia and their fellow Slavs, but also to avoid the sanctions or punishments most combatant nations reserved for citizens or subjects of each other's enemy nations; "enemy aliens" could be subject to internment, deportation, or expropriation of property. Leaders of the Czech and Slovak émigrés declared their loyalty and won approval to create a separate unit in the Russian Army, which became known as the *Ceska Druzina*. The government required that commanders of the *druzina* and at least a third of its officers be Russian, and that its recruits had to be – or become – Russian subjects³. The émigrés also founded a Union of Czecho-Slovak Organizations in Russia, with an Executive Committee in St. Petersburg and a Military Commission in Kiev, which helped organize the *druzina*.

² Unless otherwise indicated, information about the Czech and Slovak émigrés and enemy aliens is from this source.

³ For the early *Ceska Druzina*, see (Josef Kalvoda, 1986. Pp. 60–67; Josef Kalvoda, 1985. Pp. 419–422; Victor M. Fic, 1977. Pp. 1–51).

After their training, the first émigré volunteers were given their weapons – Russian rifles with long, thin bayonets – on August 28th, and by early September about 750 men – all Czech except for 16 Slovaks – were formed into the three companies that comprised the initial *Ceska Druzina*. They were sworn in on Sophia Square in Kiev on September 28th, and the unit left for the front October 22nd to serve with the Russian Third Army in Ukraine⁴. Given their knowledge of a few of the languages of Austria-Hungary, they served in small units for reconnaissance and intelligence work.

During the war, members of the *druzina* were credited with enticing Czechs and Slovaks in the Austro-Hungarian Army to defect to the Russian lines, and additional recruits for this unit came from these defectors and from Czech and Slovak POWs.

Russia's Austro-Hungarian POWs Take Sides

Shortly after the fall of the Tsarist regime in early 1917, Tomas G. Masaryk, a professor from Prague, arrived in Russia. A fugitive in exile for his efforts to win independence for his fellow Czechs and Slovaks, Masaryk secured financial support from France, and political support from Russia's Provisional Government, to recruit Czech and Slovak POWs for a new Allied army he would offer to France for combat on the Western Front. The nucleus of this army would be the *druzina*, which now consisted of 9,249 men, 7,273 of them former POWs. Masaryk and associates immediately began recruiting more men from Russia's 300 POW camps (Josef Kalvoda, 1983. P. 223). By March 1918, when Masaryk departed Russia to lobby the United States for support, this Czecho-Slovak Legion, as it came to be known, had grown to about 50,000 soldiers.

⁴ Dates in this paragraph are Old Style. Before February 1918, Russia followed the Julian (Old Style) calendar that in the twentieth century was 13 days behind the Gregorian (New Style) calendar used in the West. In January 1918, the Bolshevik government decreed that Russia would convert to the Gregorian calendar at the end of the month. Old Style dates are given for most events inside Russia prior to January 31, 1918, but they do not align with dates for contemporaneous simultaneous events outside of Russia.

The Tsarist regime's embrace of Czechs and Slovaks, and its efforts to provide better treatment for Slavic POWs, angered Austrian and Hungarian POWs. This feeling only hardened after it became clear the Provisional Government supported Czecho-Slovak independence. In the eyes of Austrian and Hungarian POWs, of course, the Czechs and Slovaks were traitors determined to undermine their Austro-Hungarian homeland. After the Bolshevik *coup*, the new regime took control of the POW camps, and allowed thousands of Austrians and Hungarians – who were languishing in camps with few staff and meager supplies – to join the Red Army's Internationalist units.

There were many inducements to join the Red Army. Ideological sympathy was a factor for some, but generous pay (recruits were paid 150–200 rubles monthly), food and shelter, physical protection, escape from the camps, and promises they could go home – once Soviet rule was secure – were other reasons (Arnold Krammer, 1983. Pp. 242–247). “Men who had been exposed to socialist agitation for two or three years in prison camps”, historian Rudolf L. Tokes said, “found it difficult to resist the incentives of food, drink, warm clothing, a new pair of boots, and freedom of movement within the confines of a city or district, especially with such incentives reinforced by popular political slogans” (Rudolf L. Tokes, 1967. P. 60). Moscow issued leaflets and newspapers in many languages and separated POWs from any hostile officers (Ivan Volgyes, 1973. Pp. 65–66). Resisters could face reprisals, especially where Internationalists served as camp commandants or guards. “Here the Hungarians in particular inaugurated a sheer reign of terror”, said a nurse. “By humiliations of all kinds, by starvation and ill-treatment, they tried to force their comrades to adopt Bolshevism” (Elsa Brandstrom, 1929. Pp. 239–240).

Originally, says scholar Ivan Volgyes, there were 600,000 Hungarian POWs in Siberia (Ivan Volgyes, 1973. Pp. 59, 67). At least two of them would play historic roles in Hungary's communist future. Bela Kun, who would later try to establish the first communist regime in Budapest, first joined a Bolshevik cell in Tomsk in 1916. Already a socialist

when he was drafted and shipped to the Eastern Front in January 1915, Kun rose to the rank of reserve lieutenant. Captured by the Russians early in 1916, he found himself in a POW camp in Tomsk. After the February Revolution, Kun took a job outside the camp, and by April 1917 he was helping the Tomsk soviet. Kun later traveled to St. Petersburg to meet Soviet leaders, edited the first Hungarian-language newspaper for POWs, and was appointed the chief organizer of Hungarian POWs by January 1918 (Rudolf L. Tokes, 1967. Pp. 53–62; Ivan Volgyes, 1973. P. 69)⁵.

Another Hungarian, Imre Nagy, who would become prime minister of Soviet Hungary, operated a machine-gun on the Eastern Front when he was wounded and taken prisoner by Russia in July 1916 during the Brusilov Offensive. Shipped to a POW camp near Lake Baikal, Nagy was introduced to Marxism in the camp, where he joined a Bolshevik group and, later, the Red Guards. Nagy fought against units of the Czecho-Slovak Legion, which took him prisoner in September 1918. Escaping from the Czechs, Nagy laid low until the Bolshevik uprising that seized Irkutsk early in 1920 – in which Nagy may have participated. He worked for the new Soviet regime for a year, including service with the Cheka, became an associate of Bela Kun, and returned to Hungary in 1921 to foment a communist revolution (Janos M. Rainer, 2009. Pp. 4–10⁶).

Yet another Internationalist was Josef Broz, a Habsburg subject who would one day rule communist Yugoslavia as Marshal Tito⁷. Born of a Croat father and Slovene mother in Croatia, Broz was a committed socialist before the war. Inducted into the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1913 at age 21 and trained as a non-commissioned officer, Broz and his Croatian infantry regiment took part in the invasions of Serbia, fighting people he would one day rule. Seriously wounded in hand-to-hand combat and captured in the

Carpathian Mountains in early 1915, he was recruited into Bolshevik ranks in a Russian POW camp. Escaping from the camp after the February revolution, he made his way to St. Petersburg, where he took part in the riotous “July Demonstrations” during the Kerensky Offensive. Broz joined the Internationalists in Omsk, though he claimed his previous combat injury prevented him from fighting⁸.

The Red Army's Internationalists

Moscow sponsored many conferences to recruit Internationalists in 1918, including a Conference of International Social Democratic Prisoners of War on March 14th, which was attended by Lenin. Other than Russian, the official languages of the All-Russian Congress of Prisoners of War in Moscow on April 13th were German and Hungarian – which must have sounded ominous to Czech and Slovak ears, since the vast majority of German-speaking POWs were Austrian⁹. POW recruitment was led by the Federation of Foreign Groups of the Russian Communist Party – forerunner of the Communist International – whose 1,791 delegates included 724 Hungarians, a plurality that may explain Kun's appointment as president of the Federation (Ivan Volgyes, 1973. Pp. 77–78).

Two scholars concluded that between 182,000 and 190,000 Hungarian ex-POWs fought for the Red Army in the Russian Civil War, and they lean toward the higher figure (Ivan Volgyes, 1973. P. 67; Rudolf L. Tokes, 1967. P. 70; Peter Pastor, 2012. P. 125). Yet if the representation of Hungarians among the Internationalists reflected the same proportion of the elected delegates to the Federation of Foreign Groups

⁸ In 1920, he returned home to the new Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later, Yugoslavia), with a young Russian bride in tow. Just as Moscow had hoped, Broz was determined to impose communist rule in the Balkans.

⁹ No doubt a few German POWs served as Internationalists, but the vast majority were subjects of the multi-national Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose Habsburg dynasty and Austrian leaders spoke German. Czechs and Slovaks were deeply aware of the German nature of the Austrian regime, and the Allies tended to see the enemy as “Germany,” since very few, if any, Austro-Hungarian Army units fought on the Western Front. For all of these reasons, many Internationalist POWs are frequently referred to as “German.”

⁵ After the Hungarian Soviet Republic collapsed in August 1919, Kun returned to Russia. Arrested in 1937 during Stalin's purges, he perished in the Gulag.

⁶ Nagy was Hungary's prime minister when its people rebelled in 1956 against communist rule. He was hanged in 1958 for his role in the rebellion.

⁷ Information about Tito comes from (Fitzroy Maclean, 1957; Richard West, 1994; Phyllis Auty, 1970).

of the Russian Community Party – 724 out of 1,791 delegates, or 40 percent – then the total number of Internationalists could easily have been 200,000.

Indeed, two scholars put the number of armed POW Internationalists at closer to 200,000. Krammer says “the accepted number” of Austrian and Hungarian POWs in the Internationalist Brigades was 190,000 – 100,000 Hungarians and 90,000 Austrians or Germans. He adds, “Most eventually fought on all of the internal fronts during the civil war” (Arnold Krammer, 1983. P. 247). Historian John Bradley estimates that the Internationalists consisted of 12 nationalities and 182,000 men (John Bradley, 1968. P. 62).

In what became a key battleground for the Legion – the Trans-Siberian Railway between Irkutsk and Vladivostok – Krammer says, “ex-prisoners of war constituted the bulk of the Red forces” (Arnold Krammer, 1983. P. 254). Internationalist units comprised of ex-POWs (at least in part) were established in more than 400 cities and towns, with units of at least 100 in 76 cities, and the vast majority of these soldiers were Austrian or Hungarian (Rudolf L. Tokes, 1967. Pp. 60–61). Krammer said they helped establish Soviet rule in 16 cities (Arnold Krammer, 1983. P. 244). Red Army officer Semyon M. Budyonny praised the skill and enthusiasm of these Internationalists in combat against Allied forces (Ivan Volgyes, 1973. P. 84). And Kun’s biographer says, “During the first 10 months of 1918, Hungarian and other foreign socialist prisoner groups in Russia amply justified Bolshevik expectations of their immediate military value” (Rudolf L. Tokes, 1967. Pp. 75–79). “In fact”, an historian notes, “Bolshevik power during the spring months of 1918 rested to a great extent upon the bayonets of prisoners of war of the Central Powers” (Victor M. Fic, 1977. P. 93).

Czecho-Slovak legionnaires, who could easily identify Austrians and Hungarians, encountered them often across Russia. A Czech officer on the first Legion train to cross Siberia, Capt. Vladimir S. Hurban, said in 1918, “In Siberia there are today some hundred thousand German and Hungarian prisoners, a great number of whom are armed. It is these men who offer considerable resistance to our army; the Russian

Bolsheviks surrender after the first shot” (Vladimir S. Hurban, 1918. Pp. 508, 510).

Czecho-Slovaks vs. Czecho-Slovaks

More threatening was the fact that the Red Army also began recruiting Czechs and Slovaks. These men would bear much responsibility for the Legion’s revolt in May 1918, as they represented the greatest threat to the Legion’s unity and survival.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of Czechs and Slovaks supported the Bolsheviks and even fought and killed kindred legionnaires in the streets of Kiev in the fighting for Ukraine. After the Red Army seized Kiev on January 26th, 1918, Soviet General Mikhail A. Muravyov campaigned to recruit more Czechs and Slovaks. About 200 signed up from among the legionnaires, Masaryk later said, but “several of them came back the next day” (T.G. Masaryk, 1927. P. 171). Muravyov’s own chief-of-staff was a Czech, one of about 5,000–10,000 Czechs and Slovak POWs throughout Russia who joined the Reds (Josef Kalvoda, 1986. Pp. 233, 241, 243–245; Josef Kalvoda, 1983. Pp. 225–227).

One Czech recruited by the Soviets was Jaroslav Hasek, who after the war achieved acclaim as the author of the classic anti-war novel, *The Good Soldier Svejk* (Cecil Parrott, 1978. Pp. 30–191)¹⁰. Born the son of an alcoholic father who died when Jaroslav was 13, Hasek was inducted into the 91st Regiment from Budweis (Ceske Budejovice) in Bohemia, in early 1915 and left for the front on June 30th. Hasek quickly saw intense fighting, his battalion was decimated, and he was taken prisoner. Wallowing in a disease-ridden Russian POW camp near Samara, he was visited by recruiters for the *druzina* in early 1916. Hasek volunteered, becoming a recruiter and a writer for a Legion newspaper, *Cechoslovan*.

Hasek leaned left in politics but preferred anarchism and so could not keep to a consistent course. The Russian Revolution threw him into a tailspin of political intrigues aimed against the *druzina*, where he became a pariah. Hasek redeemed himself by fighting bravely. He was awarded a medal,

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all information about Hasek comes from this source.

promoted to lance-corporal, and rejoined the staff of the *Cechoslovan* – where he quickly turned his pen against the Bolsheviks. Yet as the Legion evacuated Ukraine and commenced its journey into Russia and across Siberia in March 1918, Hasek performed another about-face. He again allied himself with the pro-Bolshevik Czechs, called for the arrest of the Legion's leaders, and became involved in a failed putsch against those leaders.

In the wake of the Bolshevik *coup*, a conference of Social Democrats was held in November in Kiev, where the Legion was represented by 27 of the 71 delegates¹¹. In a sign of the growing fissure between the legionnaires and those who supported the Bolsheviks, however, 25 of the 27 Legion's delegates walked out of the conference.

Masaryk himself acknowledged that at least some of his soldiers in Russia were at each other's throats. In an article in another Legion newspaper, *Ceskoslovensky Vojak (The Czechoslovak Soldier)*, on December 6th, 1917, he said, "the Bolsheviks have attacked us and by organizing their hostile activities declared war on us. We have the right to defend ourselves". Legionnaire Josef Kohak said, "The confusion and the class hatred that had ruled all around us began to seep even into our military, in which one could detect some seething" (Josef Kohak, 1927. Pp. 155–160). Events came to a head at a meeting on February 17th, 1918, which was demanded by the radicals, who suggested that the leaders of the Russian branch of Masaryk's National Czecho-Slovak Council resign and new leaders be elected, an election the radicals hoped to win. Mounting the rostrum and speaking with great passion and conviction, however, Masaryk won over most of the participants. While joining the Bolsheviks and remaining in Russia might never have been all that attractive to most legionnaires, what no doubt swayed a few votes were the advancing German troops, which prompted the urgent order for the Legion to evacuate Ukraine by February 21st. Masaryk boarded a train for Moscow the next day.

¹¹ Unless otherwise indicated, what follows is from (Victor M. Fic, 1977. Pp. 78–155).

Czech and Slovak communists continued their campaign against the Czecho-Slovak Legion. On February 20th, 1918, a Congress of Prisoners of War Internationalists was held in St. Petersburg, which established the first Internationalist Brigade comprised of Czechs and Slovaks. These Czechs and Slovaks followed the Bolshevik regime to Moscow in March, where they began publishing a periodical, *Prukopnik (The Pioneer)*, whose first issue contained an article by Jaroslav Hasek, who declared:

We shall not betray Russia. We shall not serve the imperialists. Nor shall we go to France. We are convinced that if each man in the Czecho-Slovak Army were informed about our attitudes, the whole army, as one man, would rise up against its treacherous leadership. We are sure that the army would then declare its readiness to fight on the side of the Russian revolution under all circumstances and to the very last man.

Not the most stalwart comrade, Hasek soon ran afoul of the Bolsheviks, too. "His criticism of its unfulfilled promises, brutal despotism, and wanton destruction and bloodshed made him a candidate for a purge", says historian Victor M. Fic. Hasek was suspended from the party at the First Congress of the Czecho-Slovak Bolsheviks in Moscow in May 1918.

The heated arguments sparked by the lobbying of the Internationalists created anxieties and fears among the legionnaires, which were exacerbated by the fact that most of their experienced Russian officers had been dismissed or had departed the Legion. Although Russians Mikhail K. Dieterichs and Vladimir N. Shokorov remained the top two commanders, the Legion was slowly coming under the leadership of Czechs in their late twenties or early thirties, such as Lt. Stanislav Cecek, Lt. Jan Syrový, and Capt. Radola Gajda, the youngest and most daring of the three officers. While these young men would distinguish themselves in the fighting to come, they initially lacked command experience. "There was", according to historian Josef Kalvoda, "a serious morale problem in the Legion" (Josef Kalvoda, 1986. P. 244). Yet recruits were still joining the unit; news about its existence was still just reaching some POWs.

Fleeing advancing Germans in Ukraine, the 70-odd trains of the legionnaires began crawling through eastern Ukraine toward Russia proper in March 1918. The Internationalists gathered in Penza, a city inside Russia which was a key junction through which the trains of the Legion would have to pass. They were determined, one said, “to prevent the 50,000 men from being dragged against their will, as cannon fodder, to France to be slaughtered in defending the interests of imperialists” (Victor M. Fic, 1977. P. 149).

Internationalists vs. Legionnaires

Indeed, the role of the Internationalists is important because it was largely these men who harassed and frightened the Czecho-Slovak legionnaires as they and their equipment journeyed from Kiev, Ukraine, to Vladivostok, in caravans of separate trains. Masaryk’s plan was to have the men shipped from Vladivostok to France.

While the Bolshevik leaders, Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin among them, gave their explicit approval for the legionnaires to cross Siberia and exit the country at Vladivostok, local Soviets manned by vary large numbers of Internationalists repeatedly stopped the Legion’s trains and demanded weapons and locomotives. At Penza, the Legion agreed to handle over a considerable arsenal of weapons packed into their trains. The Reds also swarmed trains and demanded that the Czechs and Slovaks join the revolution rather than fight for the Allies on the Western Front.

Czech Internationalists were placed in charge of decisions regarding all Czecho-Slovaks, and they advised Red Army Commander Leon Trotsky that there were 15,000 proletarian sympathizers in the Legion (Josef Kalvoda, 1983. P 230). These factors prompted Trotsky to halt the Legion’s trains in April 1918. “The indignation against the Czech Red Guards grew a hundred times”, said Czech legionnaire Josef Kyncl as their trains entered Russia. “Everyone knew that it was mainly them who set the soviets against us” (Josef Kyncl, 1927. Pp. 230–238).

Austrians and Hungarians in the Red Army were especially aggressive, since they saw the Czechs and Slovaks as “traitors” out to destroy their homeland,

over and above any sense that the Czecho-Slovaks were anti-Bolshevik “counter-revolutionaries”. The Internationalists constituted a force that was as large as – if not more than twice as large as – the entire Legion, and the presence of Austrians and Hungarians exacerbated reasonable fears among the legionnaires of collusion between Moscow and the Central Powers, who would execute the legionnaires if they were captured.

After all, Moscow had signed a peace treaty with the Central Powers and both sides quickly exchanged diplomats, which was the Bolsheviks’ first diplomatic relations. The Czecho-Slovaks, notes John Erickson, “were increasingly convinced of German-Bolshevik collusion. Conspiracy theories were given added weight by the Bolshevik arming of prisoners of war in Siberia” (John Erickson, 2000. P. 130). The Internationalists posed a clear and present danger to the legionnaires, especially if the Legion resisted Moscow.

A Revolt and Allied Intervention

This growing threat – combined with an incident in which a Hungarian killed a Czech legionnaire at a train station in Chelyabinsk – led to the revolt of the Legion in late May 1918. Racing their trains back and forth across the Trans-Siberian Railway, the legionnaires met and defeated virtually every Red Army unit they encountered along more than 5,000 miles of the Trans-Siberian from Penza, where the last trains were located, to Vladivostok, where the first trains had arrived by April. By September 1, 1918, all of the various legionnaire units victoriously linked up across the entire Trans-Siberian Railway, clearing the entire railroad of Red Army units. By this time, the Legion had grown to about 65,000 men, as news of the fighting aided recruitment.

And this turn of events was important because it led to a confused and half-hearted Allied Intervention. Two principal reasons advanced for the Intervention were (1) the arming of POWs, which the Allies mistakenly thought was an effort by Berlin and Vienna to arm their POWs; and (2) the revolt of the Legion, which prompted U.S. President Woodrow Wilson to dispatch U.S. troops to Siberia in part to rescue the

legionnaires and in part to comply with demands by London and Paris that he take steps to reopen the Eastern Front, using the Legion. The fact that this army would never have been able to accomplish such a feat was obvious to too few people.

“Whatever be the truth as to the number of Austrian and German war prisoners armed by the Soviets”, concludes historian James Bunyan, “there is no doubt that the belief in their menace to the Czechs contributed very largely to President Wilson’s ultimate approval of intervention in Russia” (James Bunyan, 1936. P. 94)¹². This is supported by a memo from U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing to Wilson showing how the role of the armed POWs in Russia – misunderstood as supporting the enemy Central Powers rather than the new Bolshevik regime – affected thinking inside the White House.

Well before the revolt of the Legion, Lansing warned Wilson in his memo of March 24th, 1918, that if reports of “German” POWs taking control of Irkutsk and other cities in Siberia are true, “we will have a new situation in Siberia which may cause a revision of our policy... With the actual control by the Germans of so important a place as Irkutsk, the question of the moral effect upon the Russian people of an expedition against the Germans is a very different thing from the occupation of the Siberian Railway in order to keep order between contending Russian factions. It would seem to be a legitimate operation against the common enemy. I do not see how we could refuse to sanction such a military step” (Arthur S. Link, et al., 1984. Pp. 131–132)¹³. If they were seen as Germans or Austro-Hungarians, they were “the enemy”. The problem was that the POWs were serving the Bolsheviks, which Washington did yet view as an enemy.

Flawed Allied Fact-Finding

The Allies did try to get to the bottom of this issue, but their fact-finding effort was as half-hearted as every other effort they made in Russia. The Allies simply assumed that POWs were being armed either by, or with the approval of, Berlin and Vienna – both of which signed a peace treaty and exchanged diplomats with Moscow – for the purpose of giving the Central Powers access to the fuel and food resources of Russia.

When two Allied representatives in Moscow – American Red Cross official Col. Raymond Robins and British agent R.H. Bruce Lockhart – asked Trotsky about these reports, the Commissar lied. Denying that POWs were being armed, he suggested they send officials to Siberia to investigate (William B. Webster and W. L. Hicks, 1920. Pp. 165–186¹⁴; George F. Kennan, 1958. Pp. 75–82). Two hapless officers, British Capt. W. L. Hicks and American Capt. William B. Webster, were assigned the task. They left Moscow on March 19th in a private car arranged by Trotsky, accompanied by a Bolshevik official. Looking for POWs armed by Berlin or Vienna, they missed the scores of mostly Austro-Hungarian POWs armed by, and fighting for, Moscow.

On March 21st, they spent 40 minutes at Vologda, then traveled through Perm, Ekaterinburg, Omsk, Krasnoyarsk, and Irkutsk. In Omsk, on March 24th, Webster said, “Military prisoners in no way active in Perm or Ekaterinburg districts”, though there is no evidence they left their train to find out. At Irkutsk, their main destination, the two men actually left their train to visit POW camps and talk to people. On their very first day, March 29th, they met and consulted with Major Walter S. Drysdale, the U.S. military attaché at Beijing, who said he had traveled some length of the Trans-Siberian east of Irkutsk and reported seeing no armed POWs.

¹² James Bunyan, ed., *Intervention, Civil War, and Communism in Russia, April–December, 1918: Documents and Materials*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1936. Pp. xvi, 594.

¹³ Arthur S. Link, et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. In 69 vols. Vol. 47: *March 13 – May 12, 1918*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984. 680 p.

¹⁴ William B. Webster and W. L. Hicks, “Report of English and American Officers in Regard to Arming of Prisoners of War in Siberia,” April 26, 1918, along with contemporaneous telegrams, in *Russian-American Relations, March, 1917–March 1920: Documents and Papers*, eds. C.K. Cummings and Walter W. Pettit (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920. xxviii, 375 p.

This was enough for them to report that same day: "No prisoners in district from Vladivostok to Chita are armed, and all well-guarded". All three men were disturbed to learn that a train of 500 armed Hungarians had traveled through Irkutsk from Omsk on their way to fight anti-Bolshevik forces under Cossack leader Semyonov, but they were assured by Bolshevik authorities that these POWs had joined the Internationalists and, as a result, did not count as armed POWs. Webster and Hicks concluded about this group: "Exact figures later but number not large at present".

On March 31st, the two men interviewed members of the Irkutsk Soviet, they said, "all of whom were very friendly. They gave us full facts which confirmed our information and which we believe to be true. There are in all of Siberia not over 1,200 armed prisoners, most of whom are from Omsk. These men were selected with great care as being Social-Revolutionaries and Internationalists who have given up their old allegiances and have become citizens of the Russian Republic and [are] not intending to return home ... It is not intended to use them in the future for any military operations ... [and] that no more than a maximum of 1,500 prisoners will be armed in the whole of Siberia, and that these would always be kept under strict control and surveillance of Bolshevik officers and will never be allowed to act as an independent force". The Allied officers then asked how the Allies could assist Russia. They returned to Moscow and submitted their report on April 26th. Trotsky was pleased.

Throughout their fact-finding trip, Webster and Hicks no doubt saw large numbers of Red Army Internationalists. It did not occur to them that a plurality, if not a majority, of them were, in fact, ex-POWs who once served the Central Powers.

A source Webster and Hicks cited in support of their findings, Major Drysdale, later recanted, according to U.S. Admiral Austin M. Knight at Vladivostok, who reported on June 26th that Drysdale "fully confirmed" reports of 20,000–30,000 armed POWs fighting on behalf of the Bolsheviks. "Drysdale, who has heretofore minimized danger from war prisoners admits they have now gone beyond [the]

control [of the] Soviets", Knight telegraphed Washington (Papers Relating..., 1932. Pp. 230–231). Yet the Webster-Hicks report became the standard response to claims that Moscow was arming POWs. The real threat posed by the Internationalists was relayed to Lansing by William G. Sharp, U.S. Ambassador to France, on April 11th, 1918. Yet, historian Donald F. Trask says, "The United States government tended to discount this argument after receiving reports from American observers in Russia, which indicated no immediate threat of such activity" (David F. Trask, 1961. P. 113). Indeed, U.S. Major General William S. Graves, the commander of all U.S. troops in Russia, was among those who believed the Webster-Hicks report (William S. Graves, 1941. P. 26).

The size, composition, and combat role of the Internationalists were not only underestimated by observers in Siberia, but even later by scholars like George F. Kennan. His otherwise highly valuable work on revolutionary Russia downplays the role of hundreds of thousands of Austrian, Hungarian, or German POWs fighting for Moscow – a result of his effort to dispel rumors that the POWs were being armed by Berlin (George F. Kennan, 1956. P. 283; George F. Kennan, 1958. Pp. 71–75). Kennan says, "there could not have been more than 10,000" armed Central Powers POWs, and he makes much of the fact that "there were relatively few Germans". Based on the flawed report by Hicks and Webster, Kennan concludes that "relatively few of these prisoners were ever armed and used", which has been thoroughly disproven by much original documentation and by many scholars.

Kennan's critique revealed the central weakness in the arguments that the POWs did not pose a threat: "Only a tiny proportion of these, if any, can have been German". This truth implies that Austrian and Hungarian POWs somehow did not count, despite their legal status as enemy soldiers allied with Germany, and despite their evident hostility toward the Legion, the most formidable Allied army in Russia. As already shown, Austrian and Hungarian POWs were no doubt more hostile than Germans to the legionnaires, given the Legion's political aims. Yet Kennan concludes, "Their influence on the course of

events in Siberia following the Bolshevik *coup* was not great". This conclusion is overwhelmed by evidence to the contrary.

To the legionnaires, however, it made little difference whether Berlin and Vienna were arming them, or whether the Bolshevik regime was doing so. The hostility Austrian and Hungarian POWs felt toward the Czechs and Slovaks preceded – by a few centuries – the hostilities that broke out between Moscow and the legionnaires. While the Internationalists were not under the Central Powers' command, significant numbers of German, Austrian, and Hungarian POWs did not merely threaten the legionnaires, but actually fought and killed them. By May 1918, it hardly mattered to the embattled legionnaires which government was arming their enemy combatants.

Also overlooked is the fact that Berlin could have armed its own POWs in Russia and could also have used food, clothes, or pay to lure other ex-POWs away from the Internationalist units. Through November 1918, the Bolshevik regime survived at the pleasure of Berlin. On June 25th, 1918, Germany's ambassador to Russia, Wilhelm von Mirbach – who would soon be

killed by Russian revolutionaries – told Minister of Foreign Affairs Richard von Kuhlmann that if Moscow resisted or betrayed Berlin, its regime could be toppled. "In the event of a change of orientation here, we would not even have to apply a great deal of force, and we could, to some extent, keep up appearances in our relations with the Bolsheviks right to the last moment", Mirbach said, "and any military advance made by us on any considerable scale – and it would not even have to be directed against the two capitals [Moscow and St. Petersburg] – would automatically lead to the fall of Bolshevism, after which, equally automatically, the new organs of government, which we would be holding in readiness and which would be entirely at our service, would step into the ensuing gap" (The Minister in Moscow..., 1958. Pp. 137–139).

Despite the passing of more than 100 years, and despite the overwhelming historical importance of World War One, the Russian Revolution, and the Russian Civil War, key aspects of these historic events, especially the roles of the Czecho-Slovak Legion and the Red Army's Internationalist units, remain shrouded in misunderstanding.

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